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Cautionary Tales

In February, NCPC unveiled its approach for the revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the Capital Building. The ideas presented by NCPC staff and their consultants at ZGF, include an exciting, cutting-edge conceptual framework – The Avenue as Venue – essentially a frame for how the Avenue can function programmatically, and three different approaches to designing the physical infrastructure needed to support those activities. The Avenue as Venue would host a myriad of events, from the traditional historic Inaugural Parade to Art events, pop-up markets, concerts, light shows, protests, rallies and other first amendment expressions that the Park Service would intentionally redirect from the Mall, etc. All the planners wisely understand that the traditional activators of public space – retail and restaurants – cannot thrive in a place that is so structurally challenged by the nuances of its location. The Avenue offers a first-class, unique vista and with it, awesome potential for civic space, but a second-rate marginal location for active retail. It is what it is.

As someone who spent the first ten years of his career working at the last version of this effort – The Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC) – I was impressed by the work and encouraged that the presentation was so enthusiastically received by the Commissioners. The representative from the National Park Service (NPS) was particularly enthused - rather giddy would not be an exaggeration - by the plans. Which is important since NPS has maintenance responsibility for the Avenue's public spaces including its wide sidewalks, parks, and plazas.

Which brings me to my Cautionary Tales. After 10 years 'on the Avenue,' I can assure you that there is a story lurking under every square foot of expensive paving, and I would like to share a couple of them that are relevant to this current admirable effort.

Well before PADC hired M. Paul Friedberg to design Pershing Park between 14th and 15th Street across the Avenue from the historic Willard Hotel, we did our own (then) cutting-edge work. We hired a young consultant firm, Project for Public Spaces (PPS), run by Fred Kent and Steve Davies to help us figure out how to create a successful park. Fred and Steve were proteges of William H. (Holly) Whyte who used 1970s-era technology, time lapse photography, to analyze how people

actually act in public, how they use public space; they looked carefully and analytically at what works and what doesn't in a given place. Mr. Whyte's seminal book and video, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, and Fred and Steve's PPS work over the decades remain essential texts – pretty much the gold standard – for activating the public realm. If you are not familiar with them, and care about the design of public space, google it now.

Directly as a result of that work with PPS, which informed the PADC programming brief, the final design for Pershing Park included:

- Movable seating. Tables and chairs that allow people to form their own social groupings gives people a sense of ownership of the space
- Ice rink. An activity for people to participate in or watch others doing, attracts people to a space. Ice rinks in particular attract people of various ages.
- Food kiosk. Hard to believe now, but in 1975 we needed a consultant to tell us that food was a good thing to have in public space.
- A Park Police substation. PPS discovered that many successful public spaces have a 'mayor,' whether official or informal, someone on-site who cares about the space and its condition and who offers a deterrent to those who don't.
- Waterfall. At the time, the recent success of what was called vest pocket parks in NYC was partially attributed to the visual focus of waterfalls, as well as the way the sound masked auto noise from nearby streets.

Mr. Friedberg designed Pershing Park to include all these cutting-edge public realm programmatic elements. His JV partner Jerome Lindsey, a DC-based African American architect, designed the glass-domed kiosk, and an attractive and active park was dedicated in 1981. The NPS was responsible for maintenance and operation of the food and ice rink activity generators. This being Federal land, there wasn't really a choice for maintenance, but NPS was considered fine. I mean, they care for The National Mall and the Grand Canyon, certainly a city park would be a piece of cake. So far so good.

By the mid 2010s every one of the features on the list of cutting-edge activity generating elements PPS recommended was either not operational or in disrepair. Whether due to lack of understanding, lack of interest, budget, or other ridiculous outmoded regulatory constraints, I don't know, but by 2019, every one of these features was literally demolished and replaced by a quite ordinary war memorial that easily could have been built before planners had a clue about how to activate public space. One wonders why the NPS would be giddy about an Avenue as Venue approach – or any approach – that would require maintenance and operational effort that they are clearly not prepared for.

But wait, there's more. And the more is not Freedom Plaza. That is its own nightmare about what happens when design oversight is granted to those without vision. Maybe we'll revisit that some other time.

Market Square, at Eighth Street and the Avenue, is a similar story with a different cast of characters. This semi-circular public space is better situated to be a good urban public space because, unlike the traffic island configuration of Pershing Park and Freedom Plaza, it is lined by

retail spaces and entrances to the mixed-use buildings which shape the space. Beyond that, though, Market Square is home to the Navy Memorial, which was envisioned as a 'living memorial' by virtue of being a performance home to the US Navy Band and associated groups that would give concerts there regularly, attracting people to the Avenue on evenings and weekends. This effort was sponsored by the US Navy Memorial Foundation who built and maintains a visitors' center adjacent to the space.

The performance function presented many challenges, especially since no permanent structures could be allowed to interfere with the historic reciprocal vista between the Archives and Portrait Gallery facades. The infrastructure – storage space for acoustic panels, risers, seats, and other equipment - was constructed under Market Square, to be accessed via a hatch in the plaza for performances. For many years, The Navy Memorial Foundation even provided a 'Mayor' for the space, a retired sailor who kept an eye on things, answered tourist questions about the map in the paving, chased off the skateboarders, etc. So far so good.

But the commitment of the Navy to this as a performance home for the Band turned out to be illusory, and neither the Foundation nor NPS has the interest or the capability to program concerts even with the infrastructure in place. Market Square remains a fine public space. Office workers and tourists mingle, eat lunch, look at the Memorial sculptures and bas-reliefs, but a real opportunity for The Avenue as Venue goes wanting.

So, The Cautionary part: as exciting as it is to envision *what* might happen on a re-imagined Pennsylvania Avenue, it critical to figure out *how* it will happen and be sustained. The key to the success that PADC had in the first round of this effort was not the quality of the planning (as much as I hate to say that...) but the 'development corporation' structure and congressional funding that allowed the planning to be implemented.

I love urban designers and planners as much as anyone anywhere, but before we give them free rein, we must give the attorneys, businesspeople, bureaucrats, and, yes, politicians a chance to come up with a governance strategy. Some sort of well-funded organization that is as committed to the Avenue's place in our nation's and city's life as my associates and I were at PADC back in the day.

Thanks for all the hard work and great ideas. Keep it up!

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